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STATE FOR NEA/MAG - HARRIS AND NEA/PI

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: BEN ALI 2009: THE CAMPAIGN BEGINS

REF: TUNIS 2744

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES a.i. DAVID BALLARD FOR REASONS 1.4 (b)
AND (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Immediately on the heels of the nineteenth anniversary of Ben Ali's rule on November 7th, his campaign for the 2009 elections appears to have begun. RCD regional entities and senior GOT officials supported the RCD-controlled Chamber of Advisors' November 9th call for Ben Ali to run for his fifth term. As Ben Ali is constitutionally allowed to remain in power through 2014, his likely candidacy in 2009 was expected. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) On November 9th, members of the (Senate equivalent) Chamber of Advisors' First Commission called on President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to be a candidate for the 2009 presidential elections. In a session to review the state budget, which was attended by Presidential Spokesman and Minister of State Abdelaziz Ben Dhia, the First Commission, one of several parliamentary commissions, voiced its support for Ben Ali's policies and new initiatives suggested in his November 7th speech to mark the nineteenth anniversary of the "Blessed Change." In order to ensure Tunisia's continued progress, the Commission reportedly asked Ben Ali to run again in 2009.

¶3. (C) According to press coverage, on November 10th, Ben Dhia spoke to a group of regional entities in the governorate of Manouba. (NOTE: Almost all events covered by the local press are organized or attended by GOT-loyal organizations and individuals, and usually include members of the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party. END NOTE.) After outlining highlights of Ben Ali's November 7th speech, Ben Dhia answered questions from the audience. Local media reported that an individual in attendance called on Ben Ali to be the RCD candidate in the 2009 elections. Ben Dhia reportedly responded that, he, like all Tunisians who enjoys the benefits of Ben Ali's rule, supports this suggestion. However, Ben Dhia added that Ben Ali would have the final say on his candidacy.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: The 2002 constitutional referendum extending the age limit for presidential candidates to 75 was the first indicator Ben Ali plans to be president through 2014. Thus, it would be no surprise if Ben Ali runs in 2009 or if his candidacy is marketed as a response to the will of the people. In the months to come, all GOT-loyal entities are likely to voice their support for his 2009 candidacy. Although Ben Ali's vocal support for pluralism is likely to continue, the current political scene gives no indication the 2009 election landscape or ultimate results will differ in any substantive way from past elections.

15. (S) COMMENT, CONT.: Given his high-profile image (Ben Dhia receives more press coverage than any other GOT official except Ben Ali), Ben Dhia is often considered to be a possible Ben Ali successor, although he is likely to be too old to run whenever Ben Ali leaves office. (Post would argue that he is more of an eminence gris than a future president.)

However, Ben Dhia's prominent role in these two events seems to suggest that he is not anticipating Ben Ali's departure or seeking to supplant him. Usually at the forefront of any new government policy, it appears Ben Dhia is once again sounding the herald for Tunisia's future. END COMMENT.

BALLARD